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ABSTRACT

This paper describes learner response, as indicated by questionnaires, to a package of tape-based listening materials in French, Spanish and Italian. The learners were in "community classes" (2 hours per week) at a wide variety of levels. Their response was, in general, cautiously favorable, and indicates the general acceptability of such materials, but also the need for supplementation with study packs for home use. The concept of listening strategies was widely understood by the learners, although the strategies consciously used were of limited range. (Author)

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# THE REACTION OF LEARNERS TO TAPE-BASED LISTENING COMPREHENSION MATERIALS IN FRENCH, SPANISH AND ITALIAN 'COMMUNITY CLASSES'

**Brian Parkinson, Giulia Dawson, Lucila Makin, Hélène Mulphin (IALS)**

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*Abstract*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper describes some aspects of a research and development project conducted in French, Spanish and Italian 'community classes' at the Institute for Applied Language Studies, University of Edinburgh, from November 1989 to September 1990.[1] A fuller account of the project is contained in the final report, available from the researchers. This paper attempts to highlight some findings of possibly wider interest: it does not aspire to contribute new ideas on the teaching and learning of foreign language listening skills, but to throw some light on the beliefs, understandings, wants and needs of a hopefully fairly representative sample of a large but very poorly researched group of learners and on their receptivity to a modern approach to listening.

In the UK generally, teachers and learners in 'community classes' are a large but shadowy group. Many teachers are unqualified, nearly all are part-time, combining the work with another, more 'serious' job or with family duties. Usually there is no syllabus or other guidance from above, and teachers are free to set their own aims and choose their own material. They have no professional association, and no professional journal. Learners are often assumed, by teachers and even more by outsiders, to be attending as a 'hobby': the existence of vocational needs is vaguely recognised but not systematically pursued. In general, this kind of teaching is the 'poor relation' of EFL/ESL, of modern languages in schools, and of the recent growth area of specialised modern language courses for business and industry.

The IALS community classes are in a more favourable position, in that they are administered by a group of 'permanent' staff, mostly full-time, with a large bank of resources, tried and tested teaching programmes (for some levels), placement procedures, provision for briefing, teacher education, and materials development, and cross-fertilisation with courses in EFL and (to a limited extent) Applied Linguistics, as well as with modern language courses for business and industry.

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Yet other constraints mentioned in the last paragraph still apply, and we (the researchers) feel that the attitudes and experiences of our learners are likely to be fairly similar to those in the better community classes throughout the UK. Groups consist of 6 to 16 learners, at one of 7 levels from Beginners to Advanced, attending for 2 hours per week, for up to 33 weeks per year. The syllabus is general and aims to offer something for all needs, but the emphasis is on spoken language.

Most of the work on this project was carried out by Giulia Dawson, Hélène Mulphin and Lucila Makin, full-time teachers and course directors for Italian, French and Spanish respectively. Each wrote tape-based material in her own language, discussed it with the other researchers, piloted it in classes taught by herself and others taught by colleagues (mostly hourly-paid teachers), and collected and analysed data from these classes. A second Italian teacher, Renata Leishman, co-wrote and helped to pilot the Italian material, but left before the end of the project and was not involved in data analysis.

## 2. Materials and methodology

A full description of materials and methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief outline will be given here to facilitate interpretation of learner reactions. This description relates to piloted material, and excludes further units which were written but not piloted.

There were considerable differences between the materials, reflecting the experience and preferences of the individual writers. (The research team had looked at a selection of literature on listening, notably Anderson and Lynch (1988); this was felt to have been useful, but did not produce uniformity of approach.) In French (3 units of material) scripted audio-tape passages were recorded by the writer; topics were adverts, shopping and instructions, and students were asked to list important points or (in two cases) to find discrepancies between the tape and written information. The 5 Italian units, also audio-tapes, were a mixture of 'home made' teacher-recorded material and commercial material (with teacher-designed exercises); these were mostly transactional dialogues (e.g. ordering in a restaurant) and were accompanied by numbered exercises focusing on specific items of information. The 9 Spanish units were mostly video-based, commercial material with teacher-written exercises; the topics were mainly cultural (e.g. street processions) and there was a wide variety of exercises, including some directed at inference (mood, general situation) and gist as well as detailed understanding.

In addition to describing the materials, it is necessary to give some indication of how they were used in class. This is problematic, as the obvious wide variation among the principal researchers was compounded by the use of 6 other teachers, each with her own ideas. Furthermore, no lesson observation was possible, and any description relies on indirect evidence, namely the instructions given to teachers and feedback from teachers and students. The most that can be said is that the 'standard' methodology involved presenting the materials without minute-to-minute teacher interaction, and advising the learners not to worry about individual words but to listen for general meaning. It is likely that in most cases neither of these features was entirely new, but they represented a change of emphasis for most students. This change was perhaps less clear-cut in French than in the other languages, as the questions often emphasised detail.

## 3. Results (general)

The materials were piloted and data collected from a total of 193 learners in 3 languages and at 6 levels, broken down as follows:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| French | 60 | Beginners | 31 |
| Spanish | 42 | Post-Beginners | 51 |
| Italian | 91 | Elementary | 53 |
| | | Lower-Intermediate | 23 |
| | | Higher Intermediate | 13 |
| | | HIA | 20 |

'HIA' denotes mixed-level Higher Intermediate/Advanced classes. No exact definition of the levels exists, but Elementary students have normally been studying the language for at least 1 year (66 hours), Intermediate at least 2 years.

Data was collected on both cognitive outcomes (student scripts) and beliefs/opinions (questionnaires), but only the latter are discussed in this paper.

The questionnaire was in two parts. It was intended that students should complete both parts on the first occasion that they used project materials, Part Two only on the second or subsequent occasion. This intention was generally followed, except that in French few Part Twos were completed.

The rest of this section lists the items on the questionnaire (1.1 to 1.9 make up Part One, 2.1 to 2.10 Part Two), the percentage of respondents choosing each of the offered alternatives, and an indication of the more frequent write-in responses. (A fuller selection of responses is in the project report.)

Note that in some questions more than one simultaneous choice is allowed, so totals may exceed 100%. Other deviations from 100% reflect unexplained omissions or double responses. In the comments sections, a code such as (x3) means that similar comments or answers were made by three respondents; (xN) by many respondents.

1.1 Do you think your present listening level (ability to understand) in the language which you are now studying is better or worse than your speaking level (ability to express yourself)?

| | |
|---|---|
| Listening level is much better | 39 |
| Listening level is slightly better | 30 |
| About the same | 12 |
| Speaking level is slightly better | 7 |
| Speaking level is much better | 3 |

1.2 How important to you is the improvement of your listening level?

| | |
|---|---|
| Very important | 58 |
| Fairly important | 38 |
| Not very important | 3 |
| Not important at all | 1 |

Most frequent comments

One must listen before one can respond. (x6)
To understand answer to one's questions. (x4)
I can only learn if I can understand. (x3)

1.3 How often would you like to do listening activities with tapes in class?

| | |
|---|---|
| Every session | 25 |
| Almost every session | 34 |
| Once per two or three sessions | 31 |
| Once per four or five sessions | 7 |
| Very rarely | 5 |
| Never | 0 |

1.4 In which area or areas do you normally learn most from such activities?

(tick more than one if you wish)

| | |
|---|---|
| Vocabulary | 47 |
| Grammar | 15 |
| Pronunciation | 57 |
| Learning how to listen | 63 |
| Learning how to communicate | 36 |
| Culture | 15 |
| Other (please specify) | not counted |

1.5 Some people believe that listening work should be done at home and not in class time. Do you:

| | |
|---|---|
| Agree completely | 6 |
| Agree in principle, but not in practice because you would not have time | 26 |
| Disagree, because the teacher's help is needed | 56 |
| Other (please specify) | not counted |

Most frequent comments

Both are necessary. (xN especially Italian)
At home with follow-up in class. (x3)
In class with repeat at home. (x4)

1.6 What, if any, advice has your teacher given you about how to tackle listening activities with tapes?

Most frequent answers

Advice given but forgotten. (xN)
Play tape several times. (xN)
Not necessary to understand every word. (xN especially Spanish)
Pick up words you recognise. (Most students in one Italian class)
Don't worry about what you don't know. (Most students in same Italian class)
None. (xN especially Italian)

1.7 How useful has this advice been?

Answers

Most answered 'very', a few 'fairly', etc. Some students did not answer but there were no completely negative answers, and only 3 semi-negative answers, e.g. 'difficult to follow but very useful'.

1.8 What, if any, particular ways have you developed yourself to tackle such activities?

Most frequent answers

Listening to radio. (xN)
Listening to tapes. (xN)
Develop concentration. (xN French and Italian)
Close eyes. (x3)

1.9 What, if any, other help or advice on listening do you need?

Most frequent answers

Practice. (xN)
I would like to listen and see text at same time. (xN especially French)
How to pick out key words. (x2)
Clearer tapes. (x2)
Loan of tapes. (x2)
Slower speech. (x2)

Note:

Most of the students wrote 'None' or did not write anything. About half the others seem to have misunderstood the question and described what they already did: such replies have not been included above.

**Comments on the Listening Activity Just Completed**

2.1 How would you describe the level of difficulty of the listening PASSAGE (not the questions)?

| | |
|---|---|
| Too easy | 0 |
| Easy but not too easy | 10 |
| Medium | 31 |
| Difficult but not too difficult | 49 |
| Too difficult | 8 |

2.2 What were the main difficulties?

Most frequent answers

Speed. (xN)
Missing next bit when taking notes. (x3)
Own lack of vocabulary. (xN)
Lack of practice. (x3)
Exact details, trade names. (x3 French)
Tuning in to speed. (x5)
Quality of tape. (xN)
Making out separate words. (x3)
Background noise. (x6 mostly Italian)
Understanding key words. (x5 mostly Spanish)

2.3 How would you describe the level of difficulty of the QUESTIONS?

| | |
|---|---|
| Too easy | 1 |
| Easy but not too easy | 19 |
| Medium | 48 |
| Difficult but not too difficult | 27 |
| Too difficult | 3 |

2.4 What were the main difficulties?

Most frequent answers

Keeping up with tape while writing notes/answers. (xN)
Retaining information (even though I understood). (xN French)
Understanding what was required. (x3)
The word 'senta'. (xN Italian)
How to attract attention. (x4 Italian)

2.5 In what area or areas did you learn the most from the activity?

| | |
|---|---|
| Vocabulary | 38 |
| Grammar | 8 |
| Pronunciation | 32 |
| Learning how to listen | 70 |
| Learning how to communicate | 15 |

2.6 Please mention three or four specific things which you learned.

Answers

Most responses listed specific vocabulary items, and some, especially in Spanish, cultural information, e.g. 'A little about the lives of Lorca and Dali'. Responses of other kinds included:

Pronunciation. (xN)
Concentration. (xN Italian)
Pick out key words/important bits. (xN Italian)

Brand names. (xN French)

2.7 How useful did you find the activity?

| | |
|---|---|
| Very useful | 20 |
| Useful | 43 |
| Fairly useful | 23 |
| Not very useful | 5 |
| Not at all useful | 1 |

2.8 Would it have been better to do this activity at home rather than in class? Please give reasons.

Answers

A large majority, about 85%, said no. Responses included:

No, teacher help needed. (xN)
No, feedback/communication from others needed. (xN)
No, because I would not make time to do it. (x4)
Yes, chance to listen many times. (xN)
We should do both - loan/sell tapes. (xN Italian and French)

(Students were asked to answer Questions 2.9 and 2.10 only if they had already completed the questionnaire on a previous occasion.)

2.9 What, if anything, have you learned (since you first completed the questionnaire) about how to tackle listening activities with tapes?

Most frequent answers

To concentrate. (xN)
To try to get the gist. (xN Italian)

2.10 How, if at all, have your opinions changed on the purpose and usefulness of such activities?

Answers

Most said 'not at all' or similar, often adding 'very useful' or similar. 4 respondents (all Italian) said 'more useful than I thought' or similar.

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## 4. The effects of language, level and 'teacher type' on student response

As the previous section shows, students' 'write-in' responses to certain items were sometimes quite distinctive in a particular language or even a particular class, such differences presumably reflecting specific features of materials or specific advice given. These differences, however, were rather small in relation to the total number of items and responses, and it is perhaps of more interest to look for patterns in the quantitative responses to multiple-choice items. To this end, we prepared tables of percentage responses broken down by language, by level, and by 'teacher type' i.e. whether or not the teacher was a member of the materials writing team. We formulated no explicit hypotheses in advance, though informally we expected that more positive responses and wider strategy use might be expected in more advanced classes, and in those taught by team members. These tables are in the project report, but the main findings will be summarised here.

In general we found that responses were remarkably similar across the sub-groups, with no more variation in most responses than would be expected from purely random effects. The uncontrolled nature of the data precludes the meaningful use of statistical tests, but a few impressionistically 'significant' patterns may be noted. Students of French tended to rate more highly their own speaking ability (relative to listening - 1.1) and to reflect the views of the main French teacher (HM) on the strong link between listening and speaking (1.5); in a general way they seemed less aware of, or concerned about, the development of the listening skill (1.4), but this is contradicted by their positive response to specific exercises (2.5); they also tended to find the questions (not the passages) more difficult (2.3), but not to the extent of being 'too difficult' or 'not useful' (2.7). The small HIA group - 20 students - were somewhat less favourably disposed than others to in-class listening (1.5, 2.7); this may not be mainly a function of level, however, as these two classes - both Italian - were also distinctive in other ways, including high average age (75?), long attendance at IALS and strong social bonds. Predictably perhaps, the lower-level students tended to find passages and activities slightly more difficult (2.3), but only at Beginner level did this seem to affect 'usefulness' ratings (2.7) and it did not cause Beginners to want fewer listening activities (1.3). Predictably also, activities seemed slightly more difficult when presented by a teacher who was not the writer, but not significantly less useful.

## 5. Conclusions

The questionnaire data, although limited in scope and, as always, affected by various imponderables such as respondents' desire to please, does shed some light on community class learners' general attitudes and on their feelings about listening activities in particular.

First, there is an impression of seriousness: they were not attending classes simply as a hobby, but thought about difficulties which they had experienced or expected in foreign language communication and on ways of overcoming these.

Second, an overwhelming faith in the teacher. Almost all accepted her judgement concerning the right balance of listening and other activities, and regarded her as an authority not only on facts about the target language but also on the best way to listen and to learn.



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Third, the learners had clearly not been given, nor had they developed for themselves (at least at a conscious level) any elaborate system of listening strategies. Many had been made aware of, and seem to have accepted, the need to listen for overall meaning and not to be put off by unknown words, but beyond this there was no concrete evidence of strategy development. Similar evidence that conscious strategy use in IALS community classes is limited can be found in Parkinson and Howell-Richardson (1989) and in Parkinson and Nicolson (1988). It is an open question whether this represents a weakness in learning, teaching or materials, or whether such advice would have been unproductive because more complex strategies are inappropriate in community class situations, or because it is better to develop them on an unconscious level by practice.

Fourth, the learners accepted the value of tape-based listening activities. Their response was by no means ecstatic: listening was probably not their favourite activity, and they did not want more than they were getting, but they recognised that such activities are useful and that non-interactive listening is a skill which must be learned. This is an important finding, because at the start of the project some team members feared a negative learner reaction to any 'withdrawal' by the teacher, any change from a methodology where she intervened constantly to explain and supplement taped material. In this respect the learners perhaps showed greater maturity than some of us had given them credit for.

Fifth, learners generally accepted, as we had hoped, that listening to tapes in class, as opposed to at home, is not a waste of class time. In fact they thought of far more reasons than we had thought of for believing that the presence of teacher and fellow learners is useful.

Sixth, many felt that listening at home was useful *in addition* to classwork, and indicated that they would be willing and able to do this. These findings encouraged us to bring forward a plan, already conceived but in abeyance, to develop 'study packs' relating to listening and other skills for use at home in conjunction with our community courses, and later perhaps for distance learning. This will be the focus of our research and development project in 1990-91.

**Note**

1. This paper was written by Brian Parkinson on the basis of research conducted mainly by the other three authors. On some matters of detail, the text may not reflect the views of all four authors.

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